

COVID Update December 8, 2021

The predicted winter Delta surge appears to be starting. The decline in U.S. cases reversed the past week, with a 45% increase in new cases, 40% increase in deaths, and 6% increase in hospitalizations. There have now been over 788,000 deaths from COVID in the U.S.

In S.C, cases also rose markedly, by 86%. The seven day rolling average daily case number as reported by Johns Hopkins for the entire state is now 20/100k population, up from 7 last week, which is the 'moderate' range. Greenville County incidence remains in the 'high' range,

The Omicron variant has dominated COVID news the past week. It is now widely spread throughout the world, and has been reported in 19 states, including Georgia although not S.C. (yet – experts are sure it is here, however.)

Omicron appears to be much more transmissible than Delta, looking at incidence curves as well as reports of outbreaks. It rapidly out-competed Delta in South Africa, now being by far the dominant strain in most provinces, but whether it will do so in the U.S. is uncertain as our vaccination rate is higher. Pfizer announced that it appears a third dose of its vaccine is needed to confer solid protection, but that report has not yet been peer reviewed. The vaccines appear to protect against severe illness, but vaccinated individuals can contract and spread Omicron. Most of the symptomatic cases, and all the severe ones, in South Africa were in unvaccinated people, who are mostly children and young adults. It also appears that Omicron can infect people previously infected with Delta, so prior infection does NOT confer significant immunity. It is possible that monoclonal antibody will also be less effective in prevent severe illness in the unvaccinated, although that has not yet been proven. However, while there are several reports of 'antibody escape' diminishing the effectiveness of vaccines and native immunity significantly, there are other immune defenses besides antibodies and it is expected that vaccination will still be protective. And masks and distancing are still required in group settings and likely will be in the foreseeable future. Several computer models are projecting that Omicron will surge in the U.S. but peak in late spring or early summer.

Demonstrating transmissibility, one Omicron outbreak in Denmark last week involved 120 attendees at a corporate conference, all fully vaccinated, of whom 100 contracted the Omicron variant from one attendee who had recently returned from another conference in South Africa. That person had tested negative immediately prior to the conference. Most of those who tested positive had very mild disease or were asymptomatic. The outbreak was identified due to immediate contact tracing when the first Omicron case was identified.

The U.S. on Monday modified requirements for international travel into the country, requiring a negative COVID test within 24 hours of entry. Unfortunately, the travel bans for those from South Africa will not be effective, as the Omicron variant has already spread widely, and will only discourage future rapid reporting of variants by countries that discover them.

The bottom line with Omicron is that there is reason for concern, continued vigilance, and precautions, but not panic. Vaccination is now even more highly recommended, as well as masks and distancing and avoidance of large crowds.

The CDC has modified its recommendation for vaccination such that those recovering from COVID infection should NOT wait any period of time after diagnosis, but can and should get vaccinated as soon as their quarantine period ends. The 90 day wait now only applies to those who received monoclonal antibody.